
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD MASTER PLAN REVIEW

Property Address:	North Capitol/Michigan Avenue, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	McMillan Reservoir		Consent Calendar
		X	Master Plan
Meeting Date:	May 24, 2012	X	Alteration
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott	X	New Construction
		X	Demolition

The District of Columbia, represented by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED), seeks the Board's review of a draft master plan for the McMillan Sand Filtration Plant, a component of the larger McMillan Park Reservoir that is listed as a landmark in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites.

Project Team

The master plan has been developed by the Vision McMillan Partners (VMP), a team assembled by the city to develop and guide the master planning process. The team consists of the architecture and planning firm Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn (led by Matthew Bell), preservation consultant EHT Traceries (Emily Eig), landscape architects Nelson Byrd Woltz, and the Trammell Crow Company, Jair Lynch Development Partners and EYA (development team leaders). The structural engineering firms Bowman Consulting and Robert Sillman Associates (Kirk Mettam) have also been advising the team regarding the site's existing conditions.

Property History and Description

McMillan Park Reservoir and Sand Filtration Plant, constructed between 1902 and 1905, was the city's first large-scale water filtration facility. Typical of the best works of the City Beautiful era, it represents an artful integration of Beaux-Arts planning and architectural principles with advanced engineering and technology. The complex was conceived as part of the Senate Park Commission's monumental plan for Washington, in which the utilitarian complex was aesthetically integrated into the McMillan Plan's proposal for a ring of interconnected parks and open spaces that would extend across the city from Rock Creek Park to Fort Dupont.

The McMillan Reservoir complex is comprised of two parcels. The 68 acre reservoir site, located west of 1st Street, NW, remains in federal ownership and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The site subject to the proposed master plan is located east of 1st Street, bounded by North Capitol on the east, Michigan Avenue on the north, and Channing Street on the south. This parcel, just under 25 acres, consists of 20 below-grade, groin-vaulted concrete cells that were filled with sand to filter water. Above grade, the site is organized into thirds by two east-west service courts that contain distinctive cylindrical concrete sand

storage bins, brick regulator houses capped by red tile roofs, and concrete sand washing structures. Historically, the site had a perimeter walk lined with trees.

The site was designed by Allen Hazen, Supervising Engineer, with construction overseen by A.M. Miller, the head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was responsible for the development of the McMillan Plan's landscape elements, including the proposed ring of open green spaces surrounding the city, of which the reservoir was a part. Several years after the reservoir and sand filtration site was constructed, Olmsted transformed the utilitarian filtration beds into spaces defined by pleached allees of trees and the basin into a lake encircled by a winding drive and walking paths. In 1906, soon after completion, the site was named in honor of Senator James McMillan, the advocate of the Senate Park Commission's plan who died during its construction.

The Sand Filtration portion of the property was conveyed to the District in 1987. The entire 92 acre site was listed as a landmark in the DC Inventory in 1991.

Redevelopment and Planning Efforts

Redevelopment of the site has been envisioned by the city was transferred from federal ownership. The District conducted several community planning workshops in 2000 to explore potential new uses, and an unsolicited proposal to build 1,200 housing units on the site was submitted to the city in 2004. In 2005, the site was transferred from the District to the National Capital Revitalization Corporation (NCRC). When NCRC was abolished in 2007, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development took on the role of pursuing redevelopment and selected developers EYA, Jarr Lynch and others to develop plans for the site. The team reorganized and refocused efforts on developing a master plan in 2010, and retained EEK to guide that process. Since 2010, VMP has held a number of community meetings, design charrettes, and "salons" to obtain feedback and direction on the proposal. The VMP team will provide a more thorough summary of their outreach efforts in its presentation to the Board.

Comprehensive Plan Guidance

The District's Comprehensive Plan (2006) identifies the McMillan site as mixed use, allowing for Medium Density Residential (neighborhoods where mid-rise apartments of 4-7 stories are the predominant use, with pockets of low and moderate density housing), Moderate Density Commercial (shopping areas defined by retail, office and service businesses that range from serving the surrounding community to larger business districts), and Parks, Recreation and Open Space. The Plan provides the following specific policies for McMillan:

Policy MC-2.6.1: Open Space on McMillan Reservoir Sand Filtration Site Require that reuse plans for the McMillan Reservoir Sand Filtration site dedicate a substantial contiguous portion of the site for recreation and open space. The open space should provide for both active and passive recreational uses, and should adhere to high standards of landscape design, accessibility, and security. Consistent with the 1901 McMillan Plan, connectivity to nearby open spaces such as the Armed Forces Retirement Home, should be achieved through site design. 2016.5

Policy MC-2.6.2: Historic Preservation at McMillan Reservoir Restore key above-ground elements of the site in a manner that is compatible with the original plan, and explore the adaptive reuse of some of the underground “cells” as part of the historic record of the site. The cultural significance of this site, and its importance to the history of the District of Columbia must be recognized as it is reused. Consideration should be given to monuments, memorials, and museums as part of the site design. 2016.6

Policy MC-2.6.3: Mitigating Reuse Impacts Ensure that any development on the site is designed to reduce parking, traffic, and noise impacts on the community; be architecturally compatible with the surrounding community; and improve transportation options to the site and surrounding neighborhood. Any change in use on the site should increase connectivity between Northwest and Northeast neighborhoods as well as the hospital complex to the north. 2016.7

Policy MC-2.6.4: Community Involvement in Reuse Planning Be responsive to community needs and concerns in reuse planning for the site. Amenities which are accessible to the community and which respond to neighborhood needs should be included. 2016.8

Policy MC-2.6.5: Scale and Mix of New Uses Recognize that development on portions of the McMillan Sand Filtration site may be necessary to stabilize the site and provide the desired open space and amenities. Where development takes place, it should consist of moderate- to medium-density housing, retail, and other compatible uses. Any development on the site should maintain viewsheds and vistas and be situated in a way that minimizes impacts on historic resources and adjacent development.

Preservation Principles

The master plan has been developed with substantial input from the Office of Planning and Historic Preservation Office. Based on the significant structural, practical and economic challenges that have been raised by VMP and DMPED in preserving and redeveloping the site, HPO accepted that there would likely be significant compromises to the site’s character. In working with the master planning team, HPO sought to outline important preservation and development principles in an effort to ensure not only that important characteristics of the site were retained, but that those characteristics would shape the development of the master plan. These principles include:

Urban campus model: Rather than filling the entire site up with buildings with large footprints, HPO encouraged the applicants to consider the model of an urban campus for inspiration. In such a model, buildings would be organized in a setting that allows the larger grounds to be read as a whole, would have greater amounts of open space than a traditional urban neighborhood, and would provide an appropriate setting for taller buildings.

Relationship to surroundings: There should be improved connections and transitions to the surrounding neighborhoods but at the same time a strong sense of the property’s park-like character (which is distinctly different from its surroundings) should be maintained.

Site organization: The basic organization of the site should remain spatially defined by the maintenance corridors. The maintenance corridors should be retained in their entirety and repurposed to serve as the primary circulation routes through the site.

Park location and design: The park should be located in the central sector to preserve the sense of an open center to the site. The park should incorporate creatively reused and interpreted historic features. Buildings forming the edges of the park should be mostly low-rise and have some visual relationship to the historic Beaux-Arts structures. The North Capitol frontage of the park should include a substantially scaled public entrance.

Southern sector: As the sector most closely adjacent to a residential neighborhood, this site should be developed in a manner that is compatible with that neighborhood in building height and general character.

Northern sector: As the sector closest to the Washington Hospital Center, this site could support the tallest buildings. The footprints and shapes of these buildings should not necessarily follow the perimeter of the site, but could be free-standing with open courts and indentations in the outside perimeter of the buildings to reduce their apparent mass.

Central sector: Retention of historic features should be concentrated in this sector, in and around the open space. Because development of the north and south sectors will create new ground planes relating to the adjacent streets, the ground plane of the park in the central sector should remain at the current grade level to retain the sense of the historic site configuration in at least one part of the site. Transitions in grade should be made through careful placement of buildings, ramping, and new steps in conjunction with selective removal of and penetrations in the maintenance corridor walls.

Filter beds: Consider incorporating elements of the filtration bed structures in association with the park, or at key locations like the walkway from Channing Street into the site, or along North Capitol Street in the park quadrant (where exposed sections might be incorporated as part of structures fronting onto street grade).

Perimeter: The original perimeter walk should be retained and recreated. Setbacks from edges of the site should be studied, particularly for the larger structures, to retain a sense of the property as a park-like campus.

Views: Views from and into the site should be considered in developing building placement and form, and in the location of open spaces.

Proposal

The master plan is explained in the applicant's "Stage One P.U.D. Application/HPRB Submission" dated February 24, 2012. In large part, it has been developed to respond to the preservation principles above regarding site organization, connectivity with the surroundings, park location and design, and the treatments regarding the three sectors.

Due to structural deterioration, the difficulties of reuse, and the engineering limitations of constructing on top them, 18 of the 20 sand filtration cells would be demolished. One of the filter beds, together with the above-grade storage bids, regulator houses, sand washers, and service court walls in the southern corridor would be stabilized, restored and reused within the public park. A portion of a second filter bed would be retained in the open northeast corner of the site, and the above-grade structures in the northern corridor would be rehabilitated (possibly for retail use). The plan calls for removal of the service court walls in the north corridor. The HPO has recommended that the VMP team's structural engineers provide further information on the existing conditions of the site as part of its presentations to the Board and Mayor's Agent.

The plan calls for the southern sector to be developed with townhouses facing onto Channing, First, and North Capitol Streets and the southern maintenance corridor. The central sector would contain a 4.6 acre park extending east-west through the site, as well as a row of townhouses, mid-rise apartment buildings, and a major retail store (possibly a grocery store) facing North Capitol Street. The northern maintenance corridor would be converted to a retail street with vehicular traffic. The northern sector would be developed with office buildings organized around a substantial plaza oriented to Michigan Avenue. It is envisioned that the plaza would serve as a transportation hub, potentially a stop on a future cross-town streetcar line.

Also included in the submission are draft Design Guidelines (dated February 24, 2012) that seek to evaluate the history and character of the site and establish general design goals and principles to serve as a guide for the redevelopment on the site (outlined on page 8-9 of the document). The guidelines include specific recommendations for the treatment and adaptation of historic resources, urban design and architectural guidelines for new construction, and guidelines for site work and landscape.

HPRB Review

The Board's review of master plans is similar to a concept design review in that it is an opportunity for the Board to provide guidance and direction to an applicant on those aspects of a proposal that it finds to be consistent or not consistent with the purposes of the preservation act. The Board need not take action to "approve" or "deny" a proposed master plan, but rather comments on whether it believes an appropriate balance has been struck with regard to the preservation and reuse of a site. At this time, HPRB will not be considering the specific designs of the individual construction projects (the townhouses, the multi-unit residential buildings, or the office buildings). Those individual projects will be filed for concept review by the project sponsors and scheduled for consideration at a future HPRB meeting.

As the master plan envisions substantial alteration and demolition of the site, the Board's comments are advisory to the Mayor's Agent, who will hold a separate hearing to weigh the proposed demolition against other benefits that the project may accrue to the city. The Mayor's Agent hearing will be scheduled after the HPRB has concluded its review of the master plan and the individual projects.

Evaluation

The proposed McMillan Master Plan would result in an obvious compromise and loss of integrity to the site. The demolition of the majority of the sand filter beds and the extent of proposed new construction would result in the loss of important engineering, architectural and open space features for which the property is recognized and designated. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that McMillan represents one of the most challenging sites imaginable to both preserve and adapt for current use. The deteriorated structural conditions, the paucity of viable reuse options for the below-grade cells, the enormity of infrastructure and site alteration necessary to stabilize the site (much less to support new development), and the inherent difficulty of inserting any development into a site that is

characterized by its park-like open quality are all factors that have made planning for the preservation and adaptation of the site unusually difficult. When taken together with the city's broader planning and economic development goals and policies (to increase the supply of market, affordable and senior housing; create retail opportunities for an underserved neighborhood; encourage the creation of additional employment opportunities; create a substantial public open space; and to increase the city's tax base), combined with the limited public subsidy available for the property, the result is one that is by necessity a compromise.

Despite the challenges, competing goals and compromise, the plan would result in significant preservation benefits. There would be substantial rehabilitation and meaningful incorporation of the above-grade features into the park and new development, and the stabilization and rehabilitation of the two below-grade cells that are being retained would be sufficient to explain and interpret their function. The site's character will be substantially retained within the new park, and the conceptual landscape plan proposes to weave characteristics of the site throughout the property. The organization of and location for new development has been guided by the preservation of existing features and public views into and from the property. And, of course, the plan would provide access to a site and its historic resources that have been fenced off from the public for more than 70 years.

The master plan has been developed and already revised numerous times during consultation with HPO in an effort to address the preservation principles outlined above. In addition to the comments and findings of the HPRB, the HPO encourages further study and attention to the following as the plan evolves:

North maintenance corridor: While it is understood that excavation for the proposed new construction makes retention of the service walls difficult, this edge condition is an important component of the design, character and feel of the maintenance corridors. The plan should be revised to more strongly encourage retention and reuse of these features, or if retention is not feasible, a statement that new construction along the corridor should be inspired by and relate to the rhythm, scale, and materials of these features.

Perimeter condition: The treatment of the edge of the property, particularly the setback at the southeastern corner of the site, should continue to be evaluated. The setback of the proposed office building and grocery store from North Capitol Street, together with the recreation of the perimeter Olmsted walk in the northern and central sectors of the site, achieves a balance between the goals of connecting the site to its surroundings while also maintaining a sense of the site's open space. Establishing some greater setback from North Capitol Street for the townhouses would more consistently establish this open condition along this entire frontage. While the urban model of placing rowhouses on the outside edge of the property makes sense on Channing Street – a narrow, quiet street in which the new houses will relate well to the houses on the opposite side of the street – it is less compelling a model on North Capitol Street, which is extremely wide and busy. A greater setback on North Capitol Street would open up public views of the park and southern maintenance corridor from the south, while also providing a more attractive landscape buffer for the new townhouses. This setback would allow the extension of the perimeter walk which, if

sufficiently landscaped and buffered from North Capitol Street, could provide an additional recreational amenity for the neighborhood.

Design guidelines: Subject to any revisions and refinements suggested by the Board, it should consider accepting the design guidelines as generally reflective of their policies for the treatment of historic structures.

The HPO also acknowledges the high degree of community interest and involvement in this project and the additional review process required at the Zoning Commission to consider impacts on the surrounding neighborhood. The HPO and HPRB's comments and findings should not be construed as constituting a recommendation for any necessary zoning relief or an evaluation under the separate jurisdiction and standards of the Zoning Commission.